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ABSTRACT

While humor can backfire or, worse, mask dark, underlying prejudices, research reveals positive and promising connections between humor and creativity, efficiency, and mental health. Although there remains considerable room for disagreement on the essential qualities of humor, several researchers after reviewing the literature appear to have focused on a core quality: incongruity, as experienced cognitively and affectively. Stimulus characteristics familiar to most people are items such as cartoons, jokes, and certain behaviors that contain unexpected, illogical, exaggerated, or out of context elements. These incongruities are often at the core of humor and are best appreciated by the more cognitively complex individual. Three theories (emphasizing the cognitive foundations of humor) have achieved prominence: incongruity theory, relief theory, and superiority theory. The various functions of humor are: psychological, sociological, educational (communication value), and physiological. Used effectively, the following guidelines may enhance learning in the classroom: (1) embrace humor and believe that it works; (2) know your audience; (3) be willing to laugh at yourself; (4) do not waste valuable class time on humor that is aimless and without purpose; (5) encourage a climate of reciprocal humor: (6) use visual examples or presentations to help maintain student attention; (7) consider asking students to use humor in answering test questions; and (8) begin class with a joke and use humorous stories and anecdotes. Used effectively and appropriately, humor can increase the satisfaction and productivity of students and teachers. (Sixty-four notes are included.) (RS)

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By

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Humor In The Classroom: Theories, Functions, And Guidelines

By
Patrick J. Hebert, Ph.D.

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Humor, like sin, sun, and self-righteousness exists virtually everywhere people congregate. Like small groups, humor is ubiquitous; it manifests itself in various forms on office walls, bathroom stalls, desk tops, car bumpers, lectures, print media, Dan Rather, all too infrequently in convention papers, and on rare occasion humor can even be found rearing its delightful head in cynical faculty members, sullen administrators, overworked graduate students, and somnolent undergraduate students.

Humor, as a pervasive part of our work day, cannot be dismissed as unimportant; its longevity and power are time-honored. Humor consultants, nation-wide, hired by such major firms as IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Digital Equipment Corporation, General Foods, the U. S. Air Force, various banks, and many regional utility companies, are paid lucrative amounts of money for workshops that promise to teach business and industry personnel how to use humor to effectively forge relationships and increase productivity. ([1])

While humor can backfire or, worse, mask dark, underlying prejudices, research reveals positive and promising connections between humor and creativity, efficiency, and mental health. There is no denying, of course, the elusive nature of humor. And at the risk of falling victim to E. B. White's warning that "humor can be dissected as a frog but the thing dies in the process," this paper will attempt to define humor, focus on pertinent characteristics,

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review major theories of humor, cite salient functions, and suggest guidelines for the productive use of humor in the classroom.

Defining Humor

Trying to define humor is like trying to answer the question, "How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one. But the light bulb must really WANT to change?" We sense, somehow, that this answer still leaves one "in the dark" (a bad pun, I know), - a feeling the writer experienced while attempting to define humor.

Earlier, Davis and Farina pointed to the difficulty in defining humor by stating that humor seems to be "a whole composite of different behaviors rather than a single one, and any explanation which attempts to explain them equally would appear to be doomed to do so by explaining them marginally." ([2]) This sentiment was later echoed by Chapman and Foot, when organizing the First International Conference on Humor, attempted to bring together the research and theory on humor and laughter and found that humor was a multifaceted phenomenon, difficult to grasp and define. ([3])

Others have attempted to define humor descriptively as a courage mechanism, tension reliever, a defense against life's vexations and woes, ([4]) and "a reaction to the incongruities of life." ([5]) On a higher plane, Sorrell declares that, "laughter lifts man above his animalistic state, sets him free, and gives his spirituality another dimension." ([6])

While there remains considerable room for disagreement on the essential qualities of humor, several researchers after reviewing

the literature appear to have focused on a core quality (mentioned earlier): incongruity, as experienced cognitively and affectively. For example, Berger defines humor as a specific type of communication that allows for a relationship or meaning to be incongruent and, as a result, produces laughter. ([7]) McGhee, a well-noted authority on humor, views humor as one of two forms of intellectual play: one is relatively serious characterized by the intent to expand existing knowledge, and the other lacks serious intent and is characterized by a playful desire and may be used to enter relationships known to be difficult. ([8]) McGhee, too, believes that incongruity is a necessary condition for humor, though, not a sufficient one. A less sophisticated but equally valid view of humor is seen as "a teacher's ability to invoke laughter." ([9]) Combining salient features of academic and layman's definitions of humor, humor can be defined as "a teacher's skill in achieving meaning through discordant communicative elements that produce laughter." In order to better understand the various functions of humor, a brief discussion of prominent stimulus, cognitive, physiological, psychodynamic, and social characteristics of humor is appropriate. ([10]) A review of major theories of humor will follow from which applications will be made and guidelines offered.

Characteristics of Humor

Stimulus characteristics familiar to most people are items such as cartoons, jokes, certain behaviors, etc., that contain the unexpected, illogical, exaggerated, out of context, etc., elements.

These incongruities are often at the core of humor and are best appreciated by the more cognitively complex individual.

Gestalt theorists argue that a sudden restructuring of a part (of a story, for example) can change the meaning of the whole. Maier believes this unexpected restructuring is the central cognitive factor in humor. ([11]) Figure and ground relationships are reversed and it is not until the punch line is delivered that background material becomes meaningful as in the following joke by Bateson:

> A man who works in an atomic plant carries a wheelbarrow full of excelsior past a gate guard every day for some period of time. The worker repeatedly states that there's nothing in the wheelbarow except excelsior, but the guard finally threatens to put him on the suspect list unless he tells what he is stealing. The worker then admits that he has been stealing wheelbarrows. ([12])

Level of funniness is thought to increase as divergence between two mental representations increases (What is gray, walks on four limbs, and has a trunk? "Elephant" is the expected answer but it is an answer without cognitive incongruity. The answer is "one of my graduate students, having dropped my research course for the third time, was seen leaving town with a suitcase/trunk").

Significant qualities of humor may be physiologically based. Senses, when aroused, create excess energy in the central nervous system (rapid neural firing), released by laughter. Also, tense muscle systems become relaxed as a result of laughter. Laughter seems especially well-suited to physiological release. However, part of the concern with this line of research is that humor is enjoyed in ways other than arousal-based only pleasure (humor based

on sex and agression, for example).

The release of tension is an important element of humor from a psychodynamic perspective. Many of us report feeling less anxious and tense after a humorous experience. Humor becomes an important coping mechanism (developed later in this paper) for tension-relief and impulse-control situations. To the extent that humor is used in a moderate way for these purposes, some would say, is what distinguishes a healthy from an unhealthy personality.

Finally, sociologists have long sense recognized the use of humor as a tool of social influence. The social significance of humor in groups, for example, is reflected in the link between the use of humor and subsequent increased group morale, cohesiveness, and conflict management. Humor may serve as an intra/intergroup bonding mechanism integrating the group member and fostering group solidarity.

Theories of Humor

Etymology of the word "humor" has its roots as far back as the Greek philosophers and in a latin word of the same spelling meaning fluid or moisture. ([13]) The Greeks believed there were four fluids or "humors" present in the body that were related to temperament or personality: yellow bile meant irascible, black meant melancholy, excess blood meant hopefulness, and phlegm meant general sluggishness and unconcern. A person was in good humor when all of these fluids were balanced and in bad humor when disproportionate amounts of either/all fluids existed.

Much of the literature on humor is disconnected; no cogent

theoretical foundation is discernable though a number of theories exist. Wicker's, et al., Disposition theory posits that "funniness" depends on whether or not the publics like or dislike the focus of the humor. ([14]) O'Quin and Aronoff's Cultural Function theory argues that humor performs salient cultural functions such as ensuring cultural identity and enforcing social norms. ([15]) Fry's Psychobiology theory of humor suggests a genetic link, that a sense of humor is part of our evolutionary heritage; what activates this mechanism may well be the level of adversity in one's life. ([16]) Henry Bergson, the French philosopher, believed that "elan vital" (laughter) was the essential biological force which God somehow made into cells. ([17])

Goldstein has traced the theoretical development of humor studies through three phases: first, pretheoretical, consisting mostly of observational studies of laughter and smiling; second, psychoanalytic, producing investigations based almost exclusively on Freud's writings of wit and humor; and, third, more recent research emphasizing the cognitive foundations (that include affective components) of humor. ([18])

From the afore-mentioned third phase of theory development of humor, three theories, in particular, have achieved prominence in the literature and thus warrant attention: Incongruity theory, Relief theory, and the Superiority theory. ([19])

Incongruity theories explain humor in terms of the unexpected, illogical, disjointed, ambiguous, or inappropriate. ([20]) Some expectation is violated creating the incongruity and usually

followed by resolution though the violation remains because reason has been undermined. This "shift" occurs when prior experiences, for example, lead to unexpected or surprising new cognitive structuring - when experiences fail to repeat themselves and patterns are disrupted.

While Incongruity theories are largely cognitively based, Relief theories, with their physiological underpinnings, better explain the affective functions of humor. The release of surplus nervous energy is believed to be a basic property of humor, at least from a psychodynamic view. Moreover, reduction of tension and anxiety is a central element in Relief theory; resolving tension creates humor, increasing the amount of tension relieved may increase the amount of humor experienced. ([21]) The most well-known proponent of this theory, of course, was Freud. ([22]) He theorized that humor allows for socially acceptable expressions of pent-up sexual and aggressive impulses. In this manner, human civility and orderliness could be maintained. Relief theories also address humor as a "coping mechanism" - a sense of humor, for example, helps ameliorate feelings of hostility and confrontational behaviors when experiencing conflict. Humor as a coping mechanism is particularly evident when used to release anger and frustration in the face of tragedy. As Mel Brooks has said, "Humor is just another defense against the universe." ([23])

The third prevalent theory of humor, today, has its roots in ancient Greece when major figures such as Plato and Aristotle wrote about the subsequent glee felt over conquering one's enemy. ([24])

The Superiority theory of humor has been described by one writer as "the most relevant description of humor." ([25]) Here, humor is viewed as the triumph of one person or group over another. Radcliff-Brown sees humor in terms of a joking relationship in which "one, by custom is permitted and sometimes required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required not to take offense." ([26]) A major premise of this theory is that people laugh (via humor) when they feel superior to others. Thus, humor can be used to promote one group over another, to ridicule the vices of others, to "discipline by laughter," to protect ourselves against danger and, in general, to use laughter as a social corrective. ([27]) Closely related to Superiority theory is the Disparagement theory of humor ([28]) whereby humor, as disguised aggression, is used at the expense of others to garner a small victory in the midst of defeat. The more intense the negative disposition toward the disparaged person or thing, the more viable the use of humor becomes in elevating the magnitude of laughter. Also related is the idea of self-deprecating humor either as an ego-defense mechanism to "save face" ([29]) or, as was so often successfully employed by President Reagan ([30]), to create feelings of superiority within his audience that, afterall, he (Reagan) was just "one of them" and that a vote for him was also a vote confirming each individual audience members' rationality and superiority over others. Not surprisingly, researchers in business and industry note that "a well-placed self-disparaging joke can sometimes help the manager by letting the group know that he or she is a real person." ([31])

Functions of Humor

Cheatwood has written, "If we fail to take humor into account . . . we have lost not just an enumeration of particular functions it can serve . . . we shall have overlooked an important lens for examining the very structure of that behavior." ([32]) The various functions alluded to by Cheatwood and other scholars and researchers, since, can be categorized as psychological, sociological, educational (communication value) and physiological.

Humor is no laughing matter; it is serious business, a powerful tool when used as a "psychic sneeze" - and when within our control to manipulate. John F. Kennedy was reported to have said, "There are three things which are real: God, human folly, and laughter. The first two are beyond our comprehension. So we must do what we can with the third." ([33]) One of the things that we can do with humor, of course, is to take advantage of its coping mechanism or PSYCHOLOGICAL benefits.

Freud was one of the earliest writers to characterize humor as a liberating element. The anxiety reduction theory of humor has been with us since the early 50s. Together, these two bodies of literature and their subsequent derivatives by contemporary scholars have spoken often and eloquently about humor as a coping device. For example, humor is seen as reducing discomfort and easing tension, a way of mitigating failure or coping with defeat (saving face), a way of disarming an aggressor, coping with adversity, or to make the serious and less interesting more palatable. ([34])

Stress, for example, is as much a part of the classroom as it is outside the classroom: concern about grades, assignments, relationships, self-confidence, personal problems, etc., abound in most classrooms. Humor can serve as an outlet (though temporary as it may be) for frustration, apathy, resentment, hostility and anger; it can offer an escape from the harshness of reality and lighten the burdens present in the classroom and concommittant with classroom instruction. ([35]) Also, as suggested by anxiety reduction theory, the level of humor arousal is directly associated with the anxiety level of students which, if true, further buttresses the case for the use of humor as a release valve in the classroom - though as teachers, we may want to stop short of enacting the following advice: A person has two legs and one sense of humor, and if forced to choose, it's better to lose a leg!

The SOCIOLOGICAL implications of humor are equally telling. Humor can be used as a binding force or channel through which group members share common experiences, develop group cohesiveness, play and work together toward common goals. Some research, though speculative, asserts that "active humor patterns can theoretically be used to facilitate or inhibit individual performance depending on the nature of the group norm." ([36])

Humor can help bond relationships or be used as the lubricant for healthy competition within or between groups. Earlier studies indicated that humor increased social cohesiveness in bureaucracies ([37]) and has a positive impact on interpersonal relations and group cohesion. ([38]) More recently, Johnston and Bullock write, "Humor

is a tool for group solidarity and good feelings. It serves as positive reinforcement of existing or developing group norms." ([39]) Duncan concludes that high-status members of a group joke more than low-status members. ([40]) A current review of humor theory and research discusses various functions of humor suggesting and confirming prior research findings regarding the positive sociological and other implications of humor. ([41]) Academics, as well as executives in business and industry, point out the usefulness of mirth in hiring, networking, and in the ability to get things done. As one New York city headhunter said, "If a person can laugh, particularly at himself, he can probably step back and get the right perspective on things." ([42]) In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that humor may play a role in reducing authoritarianism, and, in turn, may help ameliorate labor-management tensions during negotiation sessions. ([43])

In general, humor, when used appropriately, can be an effective tool for socialization whereby a stimulus is created triggering improved intra/intergroup and interpersonal relations. Humor, used inappropriately, though, can backfire. For example, depending upon whether you tell the following joke to a room of white folks who resent affirmative action decrees or to a room filled with minorities who have prospered via equal opportunity plans will determine how well-received your little joke is:

> A husband and wife are at the beach. She enters the water and at some distance begins to drown. The husband shouts hysterically at the lifeguard who is standing motionless watching the man's wife drown. The husband screams at the lifeguard, "What kind of lifeguard are you?" The lifeguard apologetically replies, "I'm sorry, I can't

swim." Whereupon, the husband, at his wit's end, asks, "How the hell did you get this job?" Replies the lifeguard, "I'm bilingual." ([44])

Bryant, et al., report that the empirical evidence linking humor to increased learning is inconclusive. ([45]) Others report that there are many studies confirming humor as a "spur to learning and retention." ([46]) Humor, though, does seem to serve many EDUCATIONAL (or communication) functions as well. Maslow, afterall, defined humor and laughter as "education in a palatable form." ([47])

Humor can help develop higher order thinking skills and "forces people's minds into modes of thinking that are investigative, seeking, grasping, and filled with trial-and-error." ([48]) Humor may be an elixir that soothes the mind into thinking more clearly about ideational relationships, connections, similarities. Alice M. Isen, a psychologist at the University of Maryland in Baltimore believes that, "any joke that makes you feel good is likely to help you think more broadly and creatively." ([49]) Humor can be a bridge connecting the right and left hemispheres of the brain, converting an "Ha ha" into an "Aha!" Humor enables us to perceive ordinary information in unusual patterns and connections, making fixed positions less rigid. Goodman believes that humor plays a vital role in creative problem solving by producing an "unexpected justaposition and the sudden shift in context on which humor greatly depends . . . ." ([50]) producing a heightened awareness where more of the senses are called to action. It would seem that through humor, the mind associates more freely, openly, and

clearly, generating more ideas and ways to solve problems.

Humor can be an effective communication tool. Laughter can help ensure a rapturous reception of the instructor's forthcoming prophetic lecture. In addition, laughter is seen to coordinate human interaction as a turn-taking cue, approval and invitation for the hearer to respond in kind, an invitation to elaborate, and a resource in affiliation. ([51])

Humor, then, as an educational benefit, has as its chief function, the ability to unhitch our blinders, to rattle our perceptions, to help us look at one thing and see another (in a creative sense) as in the old Chinese parable: If a man is sitting on a horse facing the rear, why do we assume that it's the man who is backwards?

Perhaps Weaver and Cotrell have best summed up the educational role that humor plays in the classroom:

> A warm, genuime, sense of humor can reveal humanness - a comfortable, secure attitude with themselves as instructors, with their course material (knowledge), with their students, and with their relationship with students. Certainly, one of the important benefits of humor is that it breeches the broad gap between instructors and students. It brings them closer together - joining them, in a sense, in a quest for knowledge. ([52])

Less well-documented are the PHYSIOLOGICAL functions of humor. In general, though, humor, because of an increase in adrenaline, norepinephrine, and dopamine secretions, is thought to increase alertness, respiration, muscle activity, heart rate, and oxygenation. And because of an increase in endorphine secretion, pain is decreased and pleasure increased. Finally, it is believed that humor may even clear the lungs and tear ducts. Rapp posits

that "a sense of humor is, in truth, human invention of the first magnitude . . . Laughter is healthful. It is beneficial to the body." ([53]) Physician, J. T. Walsh, concluded after ample research that:

> The effect of laughter upon the mind not only brings relaxation with it, so far as mental tension is concerned, but makes it also less prone to dreads and less solicitous about the future. This favorable effect on the mind influences various functions of the body and makes them healthier than would otherwise be the case. ([54])

Guidelines

As recently reported, "the volume of humor alone is not as important as composite of humor" ([55]) - a social scientific way of saying that those who live by humor, die by humor! Still, there emerges from the literature and from one's experiences and intuition certain guidelines that, used effectively, may enhance learning in the classroom.

(1) As implied through-out this paper, humor is part of the warp-and-woof of America's social fabric - not attempting humor will not make humor go away; its value is time-honored and time-tested. Take some risks. Find out what kind of humor works for you. As the Nike ad reads: "Do It Now." (An old joke involves an executive who hated procrastination. Within 24 hours, his secretary left for parts unknown, his entire sales force quit, and his assistant stole a typewriter.) Teachers need to embrace and believe that humor works: self-awareness, first, knowledge of how to use humor, second, and action, third.

(2) Know your audience so that you can better match humor to the situation. Stearns identified five variables that influence

what a person thinks is funny: age, sex, education, language, and culture. ([56]) Ethnic, sexist, racist, or humor filled with personal antagonism are often inappropriate and could breed resentment, hostility, or loss of credibility - even after the laughter dies and particularly when there is an absence of trust. Humor in the classroom should be used to destroy stereotypes, not reinforce them.

(3) Be willing to laugh at yourself. Teachers who laugh at themselves affirm their humanness. They admit an "occasional" error, acknowledge their "only" personality flaw, declare their "single" insecurity, and even begrudgingly acknowledge that their area of specialty (generalists, of course, have gone the way of the horse-and-buggy) should not be equated with a new world order! Self-effacing humor shows self-confidence and builds rapport between student and teacher. In addition, self-disparaging humor may increase a speaker's image or "character" ratings, ([57]) though moderation, here, is encouraged.

(4) Humor (too much of it) that is aimless and without purpose wastes valuable classroom time and may, instead, function as a distraction. Humor should be used teleologically - as a goal-oriented "weapon of CONstruction." Humor that is relevant to a main idea, that clarifies, penetrates, debunks untruths, etc., is humor that is pertinent, worthy of class time, and helps justify student investment in the classroom. What to do with humor that is well-intentioned but misfires? Bury it...in class...in a cigar box...conduct a brief "gravesite" ceremony...and move on!

(5) Encourage a climate of reciprocal humor. Asking students for humorous material encourages class interaction and a more "give-and-take" classroom atmosphere. ([58])

(6) Visual examples/presentations (transparencies and video tapes of, for example, cartoons and award-winning television commercials) can be used to help maintain student attention when addresing a main idea; in addition, critical thinking skills can be enhanced. Borchardt ([59]) writes:

> Visual examples of humor can be incorporated into teaching critical thinking while teaching course content.... A wide range of subjects can be found in videos and cartoons to provide visual material. What is best about using humorous material is that there is usually an underlying serious problem to be found, and in identifying the problem, the higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation can be put into practice. (p. 15)

(7) Some evidence indicates that asking your students to use humor in answering test questions improves creativity scores. ([60]) Humor may legitimize nonconventional, divergent thinking. Instructors may be surprised to see answers that contain unexpected consequences, curious but relevant bisociations, fusion of several "apparently" incompatible perspectives, unusual but pertinent ideas - all elements typical of humor.

(8) Other guidelines for the use of humor may include beginning your class with an amusing thought or joke, the use of humorous stories and anecdotes, relating student-oriented activites that often contain comic material, and taking "commercial breaks." ([61]) The aim, here, is to get your students actively involved on an intellectual and emotional level - to assume an involved, interested stance. Stat writes, "To involve your audience

emotionally, you must create a drama - comedy (humor) is often the best tool to use." ([62])

Summary

Humor is a powerful tool. Yet, to this writer, it remains an undeveloped resource, a resource as old, tried, and true as Western Civilization itself. Used effectively and appropriately, humor can increase the satisfaction and productivity of students and teachers in the classroom. Humor, alone, of course, is no panacea for curing all classroom ills. There is the element of risk with its negative consequences. And humor must be nurtured, polished, and practiced to be effective. Furthermore, instructor knowledge, skill, desire, enthusiasm, and empathy are all necessary elements of quality instruction. Still, humor as a "gift," may be the shortest distance between the student and the teacher.

Finally, while it may be a bit severe to say that "life without laughter is not worth living," ([63]) there IS an element of uneasy veracity in the aphorism, "education should teach us to play the wise fool rather than the solemn ass." ([64])

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